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The Pope to participants in the “Sport and Faith” conference: ensure sport is inclusive and its benefits are accessible to all

“Sport is a human activity of great value, able to enrich people’s lives; it is enjoyed by men and women of every nation, ethnic group and religious belonging. During these last few months, we have seen how the Olympic and Paralympic Games have been at the centre of attention of the whole world. The Olympic motto “altius, citius, fortius” is an invitation to develop the talents that God has given us. ... When it is like this, sport transcends the level of pure physicality and takes us into the arena of the spirit and even of mystery. And these moments are accompanied by great joy and satisfaction, which we all can share, even those not competing”.

These were the words Pope Francis addressed to the seven thousand participants in the “Sport and Faith” International Conference, being held in the Vatican from 5 to 7 October, organised by the Pontifical Council for Culture and attended by notable guests including the secretary general of the United Nations, Ban Ki-Moon, and the president of the International Olympic Committee, Thomas Bach, with whom the Holy Father had spoken previously in a room adjacent to the Hall.

Francis also emphasised another characteristic of sport: that it is not just for high-performance athletes. “There is also sport for pleasure, for amateurs, for recreation, not aimed at competition, but allowing all to improve their health and wellbeing, to learn to be a part of a team, knowing how to win and also how to lose. This is why ... I am happy that at the centre of your reflections these days there is the commitment to ensure that sport is always more inclusive and that its benefits are truly accessible to all”.

“But in this moment I am also thinking about those many children and the youth who live at the edges of society. Everybody is aware of the enthusiasm with which children will play with a rugged old deflated ball in the suburbs of some great cities or the streets of small towns. I wish to encourage all of you – institutions, sporting societies, educational and social organisations, religious communities – to work together to ensure these children can take up sport in circumstances of dignity, especially those who are excluded due to poverty. I am pleased to know that present at the conference are the founders of the Homeless Cup and other foundations that, through sport, offer the most disadvantaged a possibility of integral human development”.

The Pope indicated a task and a challenge for the representatives of sport and of the businesses that sponsor

sporting events. “The challenge is that of maintaining the honesty of sport”, he stressed; “of protecting it from manipulations and commercial abuse. ... In sport, as in life, competing for the result is important, but playing well and fairly is even more important. I thank all of you, then, for your efforts to uproot every form of corruption and manipulation. I know there is a campaign underway led by the United Nations to fight against the cancer of corruption in all areas of society. When people strive to create a society that is fairer and transparent, they collaborate with the work of God. We too, responsible for different religious communities, wish to offer our contribution for that commitment. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, she is working in the world of sport to bring the joy of the Gospel, the inclusive and unconditional love of God for all human beings”.

“I trust that these days of meeting and reflection will allow you to explore further the good that sport and faith can bring to our societies”, concluded the Holy Father, commending to God this task, its hopes and its expectations.
